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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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South Korea: The Political Scene in the Post-Summit Period

Summary

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President Chun Doo Hwan hopes to capitalize on his summit in Japan to further both his program of modest liberalization as well as his own public standing. But, in our judgment, he will face a tense autumn as greater activism by university students coincides with a legislative election campaign in Korea and with the possible return home of former opposition leader Kim Dae Jung. Given this coincidence of events there is a possibility that both the political atmosphere and Chun's program to liberalize the Korean scene prior to the 1988 presidential succession could be substantially disrupted or even aborted by year's end.

The Tokyo Summit

Teamed with the visit of Chun to Washington, the return visit of President Reagan in 1983, and the groundbreaking visit of Nakasone soon after the Japanese leader took office in 1982, the Tokyo summit demonstrated Chun's ability to manage relations with key allies to Seoul's advantage.

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This memorandum was prepared by [] of the Korea Branch, Northeast Asia Division, Office of East Asian Analysis. Information available as of 14 September was incorporated. Comments and queries are welcome and may be addressed to Chief, Korea Branch []

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The summit did little to resolve specific economic and legal issues that concern Seoul [REDACTED]

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- The joint communique endorsed Seoul's efforts to promote a direct dialogue with P'yongyang, for the first time lent Japanese support to Seoul's proposal for dual UN membership by the two Koreas, and affirmed the importance of stability in Korea to the security of East Asia and Japan.

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The Home Front

Although dissident Korean elements have tried to criticize Chun for the lack of substantive "results" in Tokyo, the President apparently believes that popular recognition of his achievements--and of South Korea's more positive international image--is widespread. In our view, this will encourage Chun to concentrate on:

- Continuing the phased program of political liberalization begun last year.
- Preparing for National Assembly elections that will likely take place next February or March. [REDACTED]

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According to press reports, Chun plans to lift the ban on some of the 99 politicians who--among an original group of 567--remain barred from public life. Chun also [REDACTED] plans to maintain a hands-off policy toward the college campuses. Since last spring, the government has withdrawn most security forces from the universities and tolerated student protests. Seoul apparently also intends to [REDACTED]

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allow greater public debate of sensitive issues such as occurred earlier this month at a forum sponsored by the monthly magazine "Sindonga."* [redacted]

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Whether Chun continues to turn the other cheek, as he did in dealing with protests this past spring, will depend largely on the extent of student activity this fall. [redacted]

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In our judgment, two factors account for the likelihood of heightened protest activity and tension. First, student activists are frustrated because their protests this past spring did not:

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- Win public sympathy and, more specifically engage larger segments of the student population.
- Identify clear issues with which to focus opposition to Chun.
- Provoke the government into reinstating stricter controls. [redacted]

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Second, the coincidence of three events this autumn--election campaigns in both South Korea and the United States and the planned return of Kim Dae Jung--will allow both students and dissidents to play to an international as well as domestic audience, testing Seoul's ability to hew to its liberalization course. [redacted]

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The assembly elections--the first real test of public acceptance of Chun's political agenda for the country--also have the potential to polarize the political scene. We do not believe that Chun is concerned about orchestrated antigovernment protest by the opposition parties per se since they are not supported by the students. But a coalition of supporters of former opposition party leaders, the "Council for the Promotion of Democracy," is trying to create a common front to attack the government and to discredit Chun. [redacted]

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If Kim Dae Jung returns home this fall, as he has publicly announced he will do, this could become a campaign issue that sorely tests Chun's commitment to relax political controls before the 1988 presidential succession. [REDACTED]

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The return of Kim--however well handled by the government--could revive the strains and policy dilemmas long associated with the human rights problem. When Kim Dae Jung was released from jail in order to come to the United States, Chun gambled that he had found a low-cost, long-term solution to the Kim problem. The Army, on the other hand, had earlier argued for implementing the death penalty to achieve a near-term, even if temporarily controversial, resolution. Chun now will likely come under pressure from elements of the Army to deal firmly with Kim should he return and to stand fast against any possible foreign pressure to be lenient. [REDACTED]

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